

Sunstein Won: Cognitive Infiltration of the "Alternative" Media



(/CorbettReport)

Corbett Report (/CorbettReport)

Sep 13, 2021, 3:05:00 AM

1 like 29

1 dislike

by James Corbett

[corbettreport.com](http://www.corbettreport.com/) (<http://www.corbettreport.com/>)

September 12, 2021

Question: How do you spot a fed?

This is not an idle question. As dedicated devotees of the independent media and serious students of history will know all too well, wherever you find a group that seriously challenges the power of the state—or, more to the point, the deep state—you will also find federal agents trying to infiltrate that group. From the original COINTELPRO operations in the 1950s right through to the recent (FBI-provocated (<https://archive.is/pLU9l>)) plot to "kidnap" Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer (with its curious denouement (<https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/michigan/2021/07/19/fbi-agent-whitmer-kidnap-case-arrested-following-domestic-incident-richard-trask/8013618002/>)), there are no shortage of examples of this phenomena.

Sometimes the feds are easy to spot. Remember the "protesters" at the 2007 Montebello SPP protests (<https://www.corbettreport.com/episode-012-showdown-in-montebello-2/>) who threatened the police line with rocks in their hands, trying to turn a peaceful assembly into a riot that would justify a violent police response? When these rock-wielding, mask-wearing pretenders got called out by real protesters as police operatives, they promptly crashed the police line and got themselves "arrested" . . . conveniently exposing the fact (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ce5GZQbb1pQ>) that they were wearing the exact same standard-issue boots as their arresting officers. Caught in the act, the Quebec provincial police had to admit (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/quebec-police-admit-they-went-undercover-at-montebello-protest-1.656171>) that the protesters were indeed undercover police officers (although, strangely enough, they never explained what those undercover police officers were doing approaching the police line with rocks in their hands).

But unfortunately for those of us who participate in conspiracy analysis, the feds are not *always* so inept or so blindingly obvious in their actions. So it would behove us to know some of the tell-tale signs of undercover agents in our midst, wouldn't it?

Well, wouldn't it?

In order to answer that question, we're going to have to take a deep dive into "Conspiracy Theories" (https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1084585), a 2008 paper co-authored by Cass Sunstein, Obama's "regulatory czar" and the husband of R2P warmonger (<https://www.corbettreport.com/episode-224-r2p-or-how-the-liberal-left-learned-to-stop-worrying-and-embrace-wars-of-imperial-aggression/>) Samantha Power, and Adrian Vermeule, a Harvard law professor who once clerked for Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia. The paper gained infamy online because it controversially advocated for the "cognitive infiltration" of conspiracy research

groups. Rather than rebutting the theories proffered by conspiracy realists with facts and evidence, Sunstein and his co-author argued, the government should instead send undercover federal agents into conspiracy analyst groups in order to influence their thinking and "undermine" their "crippled epistemology" by "planting doubts about the theories and stylized facts that circulate within such groups."

Even mainstream pundits (<https://www.commondreams.org/views/2010/01/15/obama-confidants-spine-chilling-proposal>) were quick to point out that the idea was not only illegal but self-contradictory. After all, how can the government undermine belief in the idea that the government engages in conspiracies against its citizens by engaging in a conspiracy against its citizens?

More to the point, those who were the ostensible target of this cognitive infiltration—9/11 Truthers particularly (<https://www.bookfinder.com/book/9781566568210/>)—predicted that this practice would play out exactly like COINTELPRO, the controversial and highly illegal 1956-1971 FBI program that sought to disrupt, infiltrate and discredit groups that the FBI (i.e., J. Edgar Hoover) deemed "subversive." *That* program, lest we forget, not only involved the illegal surveillance, harassment and subversion of completely legitimate political opposition groups, but engaged in truly abominable activity, from the FBI-King suicide letter (https://www.huffpost.com/entry/martin-luther-king-fbi_n_4631112) to the murder of Fred Hampton (<https://truthout.org/articles/on-the-48th-anniversary-of-the-fbi-s-black-panther-murders-activists-must-remain-vigilant-but-undeterred/>).

But by this point most people have heard all that. So today, let's go one level deeper. As it turns out, there's a meta-level upon which the "cognitive infiltration" is operating. And when we look at Sunstein's paper in *that* light, we discover a horrifying fact: So far, his paper has had its intended effect. Sunstein won.

First, let's start by looking at the paper itself. It begins (predictably enough) by zeroing right in on 9/11 Truth. Specifically, Sunstein and Vermeule cite a number of polls demonstrating that overwhelming numbers of people in various locales (including residents of New York City) believe some version of the "dangerous" "conspiracy theory" that holds that the US and Israeli governments had a direct role in bringing 9/11 about.

Rather than taking this as a sign that there may be something to these theories, or that at the very least the government has signally failed to make its case for the official 9/11 conspiracy theory, Sunstein and his partner in crime instead draw a much different conclusion: that these "conspiracy theorists"—you know, those tin hat wackadoodles who think the government lies to them about matters of importance—are succeeding in spreading their "false and dangerous beliefs" and they must be stopped.

But how to stop them? *That* is the question for the would-be controllers of society like Sunstein. By advocating that the government become more transparent in its operations? Abolishing secrecy as the *modus operandi* of the deep state? Instituting a mechanism for public oversight of intelligence operations and a concerted attempt to unearth and atone for the many documentable conspiracies (<https://www.corbettreport.com/5conspiracies/>) that the government has engaged in in the past?

Pfff. Of course not! No, the government should shut those conspiracy theorists up by engaging in a conspiracy against them.

You see, according to Sunstein and Vermeule, conspiracy theories cannot be refuted by facts and

evidence:

"Conspiracy theories generally attribute extraordinary powers to certain agents – to plan, to control others, to maintain secrets, and so forth. Those who believe that those agents have such powers are especially unlikely to give respectful attention to debunkers, who may, after all, be agents or dupes of those who are responsible for the conspiracy in the first instance."

So, what can be done about these pernicious purveyors of conspiracy analysis?

"What can government do about conspiracy theories? Among the things it can do, what should it do? We can readily imagine a series of possible responses. (1) Government might ban conspiracy theorizing. (2) Government might impose some kind of tax, financial or otherwise, on those who disseminate such theories. (3) Government might itself engage in counterspeech, marshaling arguments to discredit conspiracy theories. (4) Government might formally hire credible private parties to engage in counterspeech. (5) Government might engage in informal communication with such parties, encouraging them to help. Each instrument has a distinctive set of potential effects, or costs and benefits, and each will have a place under imaginable conditions. However, our main policy idea is that government should engage in cognitive infiltration of the groups that produce conspiracy theories, which involves a mix of (3), (4) and (5)."

First, let's stop for a moment to appreciate how truly totalitarian (not to mention outright insane) this passage is. Yes, Sunstein and Vermeule are actually saying that an actual government ban on "conspiracy theorizing" or a tax ("financial or otherwise[?]") on the dissemination of such theories "will have a place under imaginable conditions." Under what conditions do they imagine it will be permissible (or even possible) for the government to "ban conspiracy theorizing"? What does that even mean and how would such a ban not be *on its face* a clear abrogation of the First Amendment.

Such lunacy aside, we reach the heart of their thesis: that the "should engage in cognitive infiltration of the groups that produce conspiracy theories." What does this *mean*, exactly?

"In one variant, government agents would openly proclaim, or at least make no effort to conceal, their institutional affiliations. A recent newspaper story recounts that Arabic-speaking Muslim officials from the State Department have participated in dialogues at radical Islamist chat rooms and websites in order to ventilate arguments not usually heard among the groups that cluster around those sites, with some success. In another variant, government officials would participate anonymously or even with false identities. Each approach has distinct costs and benefits; the second is riskier but potentially brings higher returns. In the former case, where government officials participate openly as such, hard-core members of the relevant networks, communities and conspiracy-minded organizations may entirely discount what the officials say, right from the beginning. The risk with tactics of anonymous participation, conversely, is that if the tactic becomes known, any true member of the relevant groups who raises doubts may be suspected of government connections. Despite these difficulties, the two forms of cognitive infiltration offer different risk-reward mixes and are both potentially useful instruments." [Emphases added.]

Now, much has already been said about this paper in the independent media, so I won't retread the entire argument here. Suffice it to say, yes, Sunstein and Vermeule are actively advocating for the government to engage in conspiracy in order to convince people that governments don't engage in conspiracy. And, ominously, less than one year after the publication of this proposal, Obama appointed Sunstein (https://www.abajournal.com/news/article/harvard_law_prof_cass_sunstein_appointed_regulatory_czar/) as the administrator of the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs.

Now, to be clear, this concept of "cognitive infiltration" of citizen investigations did not originate with Sunstein, nor was it a startling new idea at the time that he wrote about it in 2008. On the contrary, if we were to peg the start of the modern era of conspiracy to the assassination of JFK in 1963, then we can confidently say that the tactic of cognitive infiltration has been around since the dawn of this era. Remember that not only did the CIA hold multiple meetings of what it called the "Garrison Group (<https://www.maryferrell.org/showDoc.html?docId=6515#relPageId=2>)" to determine how the agency could undermine or discredit the investigation that District Attorney Jim Garrison had opened up into the JFK assassination, but they actually "planted nine agents (<https://youtu.be/ns5z1BHfEvc?t=234>) inside the Garrison investigation to feed him false information and to report back to Langley on what Garrison was finding out." Talk about cognitive infiltration.

But if there was any doubt that cognitive infiltration is alive and well in the 21st century, I offer as Exhibit A this 2010 thread (<http://911blogger.com/news/2010-01-04/new-book-kevin-fenton-disconnecting-dots-how-911-was-allowed-happen>) from 9/11 Blogger as the perfect encapsulation of what cognitive infiltration in the modern era looks like and how it functions to derail investigation (or even discussion) of complex deep state operations. I encourage you to read the rather innocuous post itself (the description of a forthcoming book by a prolific 9/11 researcher) and then the discussion that then follows in the comment section.

Where to begin? I'd like to say that it's hard to fathom how such an unhinged comment thread could follow from such a simple post, but, alas, anyone who has spent any time on internet fora in the past two decades will know all too well how this type of discussion is commonplace online. Indeed, as anyone familiar with The Gentleperson's Guide To Forum Spies (<https://ronaldthomaswest.com/2017/08/21/the-gentlepersons-guide-to-forum-spies/>) will immediately recognize, this particular thread is a master class in how to neutralize potential activists and undermine any attempts at serious analysis of a topic.

As someone who has indeed read (and wholeheartedly recommends) the book being discussed (*Disconnecting the Dots* by Kevin Fenton (<https://trineday.myshopify.com/products/disconnecting-the-dots>)), it's immediately obvious that the commenters insinuating that Fenton is "satisfied with what the U.S. government has told us" about the attacks most assuredly have absolutely no idea what the book is about or what Fenton is arguing in it. (Or, to put it in internet meme (<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/tell-me-without-telling-me>) terms: Tell me you haven't read the book without telling me you haven't read the book.)

But regardless of the ludicrously off-base assertions of the few commenters raising these suspicions, they end up victorious: all serious discussion of the book ends at the point that these allegations are made and the thread ultimately descends into a LIHOP (<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=lihop>)/MIHOP (<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=MIHOP>) debate—a debate that itself is as likely a candidate as any to be the result of a cognitive infiltration campaign (a point that is beyond the scope of this editorial but that I'm happy to expand upon in the future if anyone is interested).

This entire case study in infighting is well summarized by one user who writes (<http://911blogger.com/news/2010-01-04/new-book-kevin-fenton-disconnecting-dots-how-911-was-allowed-happen#comment-225236>):

"Another way of discrediting the movement is to continually criticize and undermine the credibility of those among us who work to expose the many unanswered questions from that day."

"I've been in this movement for 6 years and NOTHING is EVER good enough for the anonymous"

peanut gallery of absolutists who INSIST that THEIR language and ideas and opinions and theories trump all others.

"There are such precious FEW among us who have anything real to contribute in terms of books and films and community organizing. But one thing can be certain: anyone who DOES [contribute] immediately get [sic] criticized and attacked simply for trying.

"You will see this same sort of divisive taxonomy coming from the no-planers and the exotic weaponry folks and the antisemitic crowd and CIT and on and on and on . . . trolling the movement, waiting to pounce on anyone who is not MIHOPish enough or uses unapproved 'syntax' in their approach.

"But ONE thing is universally CERTAIN. These people who do the most criticizing generally claim to possess a monopoly on the truth—and as such lack all credibility."

Predictably, though, this comment gets lost near the end of the comment chain, long after those who might have engaged in a meaningful discussion of Fenton's work had abandoned the thread. Another "Mission Accomplished!" for those who wish to thwart productive discourse on a vitally important topic.

At this point, it would be tempting for everyone to take a side and then to explain how the people on the other side are obviously cognitive infiltrators, sent in by Cass Sunstein or one of his minions to divide and conquer the 9/11 Truth movement. The people critiquing Fenton without having read his book could claim (on the basis of no evidence whatsoever) that Fenton is in fact a cognitive infiltrator, sent in to dilute the 9/11 Truth message. Those defending Fenton could label those critiquing him as cognitive infiltrators, designed to disrupt the work of researchers like Fenton and those who are seeking to better understand that research.

We could even construct elaborate theories about how the entire comment thread was the product of government agents working both sides of the "debate." After all, we know that every major government in the world is now deploying military officers and other agents to operate multiple fake social media profiles (<https://www.corbettreport.com/socialmedia/>), so why wouldn't they use those assets to create entirely fake discussions that lead people nowhere and discourage real users from engaging with important information?

But here's the most insidious part of all of this: when we start devoting all of our research energies to this endless game of "spot the cognitive infiltrator," *Sunstein wins.*

You see, the point of the "Conspiracy Theories" paper wasn't just to talk about the potential for undermining conspiracy analysis by inserting government agents in the midst of citizen research communities; as I say, *that* idea is not new at all and has been demonstrably used by the intelligence agencies for over half a century. No, the point of the paper was to introduce the idea of cognitive infiltration *itself* into the conspiracy analysts' discussion.

Now, instead of analyzing arguments, presenting evidence and working cooperatively toward a greater understanding of events, researchers are increasingly apt to see themselves as isolated truth seekers surrounded by cognitive infiltrators who are trying to introduce disinformation. When this viewpoint becomes the norm within the conspiracy analyst community, it becomes increasingly difficult for researchers to bear any deviation at all from their own line of thinking. Instead, the immediate response to any and all information that challenges their beliefs is: "Cognitive infiltration!"

In essence, the conspiracy analyst community begins to devour itself, devoting more and more of

its time to finding and denouncing cognitive infiltrators and less and less of its time to actually researching and analyzing conspiracies.

And at last we come to the *real* conspiracy theory for today: this was Sunstein's intention all along.

After all, if Sunstein and Vermeule had wanted to undermine the conspiracy analyst movement, they couldn't have done a better job than by loudly advocating for a government conspiracy to secretly infiltrate that movement. Suddenly, there is no room for alternative viewpoints or exploration of ideas within the movement. "Either you believe what I believe, or you are a cognitive infiltrator."

And the best part about all of this from Sunstein's point of view? The government doesn't have to actually *do* anything. They don't even have to send a single undercover agent into the conspiracy realist space. They just have to put the *idea* of infiltration out there

As someone who works as a conspiracy analyst for a living, I'm all too familiar with how the spirit of the investigations that are taking place online has shifted in recent years. People who otherwise would be spending their time critiquing and analyzing the moves of the deep state are now spending more and more of their time engaging others in purity tests and loudly denouncing each other for not holding to this or that orthodoxy or for spending their time on this subject instead of some other subject.

Increasingly, *everything* is a purity test. And when everything is a purity test, eventually everyone fails that test. No one will ever hold all of the same beliefs as you on every subject of importance (let alone prioritize those subjects in the same way that you do). So, eventually, you'll find yourself isolate, alone, frightened, wondering how the government has managed to employ *so many cognitive infiltrators* and why there are no *real* people left in the world.

And, somewhere off in the distance, Sunstein is laughing.

So, let's return to our original question. No, not "How do you spot a fed?" The other question: "So it would behove us to know some of the tell-tale signs of undercover agents in our midst, wouldn't it?"

Well, would it? Is spending our time looking under every bush for undercover agents truly the best use of our time and research resources? When we *do* engage in that hunt, how often do we ever come to a definitive conclusion, anyway? All we are left with is our suspicions, which we then harden into conclusions, usually by throwing the baby out with the bathwater and closing off discussion or exploration of counter-evidence to our own ideas.

So, the choice is ours. We can do research, discuss evidence and analyze events, or we can spend all our time in the endless and fruitless hunt for cognitive infiltrators.

But, if you choose the latter course, just know this: Sunstein has beaten you at a game you didn't even know you were playing.

*This weekly editorial is part of **The Corbett Report Subscriber** newsletter.*

*To support **The Corbett Report** and to access the full newsletter, please sign up (<https://www.corbettreport.com/members/>) to become a member of the website.*